

VZCZCXRO0290
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #1007 0921611
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 011611Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6596
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T BAGHDAD 001007

SIPDIS

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/31/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: HELPING THE NEIGHBORS MAKE SENSE OF BASRAH

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) Observers trying to make sense of this week's fighting in Basrah face a somewhat baffling array of narratives. For PM Maliki, the Basrah operation was about asserting central government authority over a city that had long been dominated by criminals and extremists, and which was slipping ever faster into anarchy. In contrast, the Sadrists and their sympathizers saw the operation as a politically motivated campaign by ISCI and Da'wa to suppress the Sadrism Trend in advance of provincial elections later this year. The Pan-Arab media saw the struggle as one of Iraqi nationalists against the occupation and its local agents. Others viewed the fighting as evidence that Iraqi institutions, including the security services, remain largely ineffective and lack public support. Still others saw the contest as a proxy struggle between the U.S. and Iran, with the Iranians determined to foment chaos in Iraq to advance Iranian interests.

12. (S) What has been missing from most of these competing narratives is adequate appreciation of the strategic import of Maliki's decision. Yes, the decision to launch the Basrah operation was impulsive. Yes, the planning and execution of the operation left much to be desired. Yes, Maliki probably bit off more than he could chew -- particularly at a moment when the Iraqi Security Forces already had their hands full fighting Al-Qaeda in and around Mosul. None of that, however, detracts from the import of Maliki's decision that the JAM Special Groups (and other JAM elements disregarding Muqtada al-Sadr's ceasefire instructions) had crossed a red line in terms of their defiance of central government authority, and that it was time for the Iraqi state to reassert its sovereignty over Basrah. Put in other terms, Iraq's Shi'a Prime Minister demonstrated that he was willing to put national interests before sectarian interests -- even at the risk of provoking Iranian ire.

13. (S) This is a point that, from our perspective in Baghdad, Iraq's Arab neighbors in particular have been slow to grasp. It may be worth pointing out in Arab capitals that the Basrah operation, though far from perfect, contained some encouraging signs: This was a national operation, involving Iraqi Army units that deployed as a national force and that, by and large, stood their ground in a conflict where the opposing force was on its home turf.

14. (S) It may also be worth noting that Maliki took a huge political gamble by ordering the ISF into Basrah, and the outcome of that gamble still hangs in the balance. The Arab neighbors can help determine whether Maliki or the JAM Special Groups (and, by extension, Iran) emerges as the victor. There will never be a better time for the Arab League and its members to demonstrate support for Maliki. If, instead, the Arab world continues to shun Maliki, then what incentive will his successor have for standing up to Iran and its proxies? For those who believe that history is

made by individuals rather than by amorphous forces, there is still an opportunity here to shape the outcome of this week's events in Basrah. The Arabs should seize it.

CROCKER